DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 425 902 RC 021 778

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TITLE Reflections on One Small School: Viewpoint.
PUB DATE 1998-00-00
NOTE 15p.
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Disadvantaged Schools; *Educational Environment; *Educational Needs; Elementary Secondary Education; Financial Problems; Mergers; *Rural Schools; *School Community Relationship; School Districts; Small Schools
IDENTIFIERS *Small School Districts; Texas

ABSTRACT

A former superintendent of a small school district in rural Texas describes the conditions and needs of the district and reflects on school consolidation and alternative solutions to the district's problems. In 1994, the district enrolled 650 students. Facilities were 30 years old and in constant need of repair, with leaking roofs and unsafe electrical wiring the most formidable problems. In addition, the facilities were too small for the student population, and teachers had to leave their rooms during planning periods. The shortage of available housing for teachers and low teacher salaries (compared to nearby larger districts) resulted in high teacher turnover and personnel shortages in critical areas. Personnel who remained in the district were overworked and were frequently asked to help with extracurricular activities. Although the community valued its school and parent support for school activities was plentiful, the community resisted raising taxes, even when a higher rate would have qualified the district for a state facilities grant. The paper concludes that schools do not exist merely to provide communities with a social and cultural life. When facilities, teachers, and instructional programs are inadequate, alternative schooling arrangements should be sought. School consolidation is one option, but communities often resist consolidation. Other options include shared superintendent services, bulk purchases of supplies and materials, interdistrict collaboration, and establishment of a countywide school board. (SV)

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ED 425 902

Reflections on One Small School: Viewpoint

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Reflections on Consolidation and One Small School:

Viewpoints

Consolidation is a term used for combining two or more schools for the purpose of improving instructional opportunities and cost efficiency (Nelson, 1985). According to Rosenfield and Sher (1977) consolidation has been a strategy for school improvement for over one hundred years. Potter (1987) reported consolidations occurring as early as 1875 when Quincy, Massachusetts began closing small schools and transporting students to larger schools.

The number of school districts in America declined from 128,000 in 1930 to 16,000 in 1980. While the number of districts and schools decreased, student enrollment doubled between 1945 and 1980 (Ravitch, 1984).

By merging small schools into larger schools, communities may gain additional instructional programs for students and increased cost efficiency in the use of state and local dollars (Nachtigal, 1994; Nelson, 1985). In addition, difficulties rural schools face in securing qualified personnel, especially in critical content areas, may be decreased as a result of consolidation (Fanning, 1995; Seal & Harmon, 1995).

According to Fuller (1982) local communities often resist consolidation, because the local school serves as the center of social and cultural activities. Community identity is often built around the school house. The closing of the local school can mark the beginning of the end of the community as a social culture (Ward & Rink, 1992). Nachtigal (1994) identified the local school as the communities main connection to the outside world. Other individuals may resist consolidation, because the loss of the school means a loss of prestige and power for individuals (Ward & Rink, 1992).

One Small School

I was a school superintendent for four years in a district of six hundred and fifty students in a rural area of Texas. Information provided in this report reflects the conditions of one rural school district in 1994 and may not be generalized to all rural school districts. For the purpose of this discussion small-sized district may be defined as districts enrolling less than eight hundred students.

Facilities

The small district facilities were thirty years old and in constant need of repair or renovation. When I first arrived in the district, students said there were birds in the ceiling of the school and that birds would peck

on the lights during class, interrupting instruction. Other students told stories of seeing snakes in the upper regions of the building.

I was skeptical at first about the attic residents, but after closer examination discovered that the outside of the building was not sealed well at the roof line. Small birds and other creatures that could squeeze between the roof and the block walls of the building made the school home. Fortunately, the electrical wiring and computer cables in the attic were operational most of the time.

While the unsealed attic was a health hazard as well as an electrical hazard, the roof proved to be in constant need of repair. To avoid a costly new roof, the school board contracted with a company to blow foam on the roof to insulate against leaks. The foam treatment was not always successful. Leaks still occurred and the students stepped over puddles inside and outside of the building.

The board voted to remodel the gymnasium in response to new facilities being added to surrounding districts. The electrician secured to replace the wiring and lighting in the gymnasium reported that the wiring in the gymnasium was unsafe prior to the renovation and that the whole building had been unsafe for a long time, but nothing had been done. The wiring was upgraded in the gymnasium. Wiring upgrade for the rest

of the building would perhaps come later. In the meantime, flashlights were issued to teachers for the occasional blackout on rainy days.

While birds, leaks, and electrical wiring presented formidable problems, the major problem with the facility was that it wasn't big enough for the student population. Ten teachers had to leave their rooms during their conference periods, so that other teachers could use the rooms to teach classes. Not having an available room to plan where resources were available discouraged staff. Classrooms were needed and the only way to meet the space need was expansion.

Housing

The small district was located in an area with very little growth. Teachers either lived on surrounding farms or in one of the two larger towns near the district. Fifty mile drives to work were not uncommon.

The major concern for new staff was finding a place to live that did not present a long drive to and from work. Some teachers rented trailer houses near the school, and others chose to live in surrounding towns. The superintendent was required to live in the house provided by the district.

Personnel, particularly the principals, had extracurricular duty. Living long distances from the school made performing extracurricular

activities after school more difficult, because a long drive preceded and followed the regular work day.

Personnel

Since the facility was old and in need of repair and the location was inconvenient for living and shopping, securing qualified personnel was a major challenge each summer. The district paid teachers state base plus five hundred dollars. Surrounding small schools were similar in teacher pay, but the larger districts to the east and west paid one thousand to fifteen hundred dollars above state base. Teachers were hired, worked for a couple of years to gain experience, and sought jobs in bigger, better paying districts. The small district seemed to be a training ground for larger districts. The teachers who remained employed in the small school were confident that their jobs were secure as long as their performance met minimum standards.

Personnel shortages in critical areas were always a challenge. Science, math, and special education were in demand in every school in the county. When a qualified teacher could not be found, an existing teacher was given an emergency certificate, or a new hire agreed to go back to school and secure an additional subject certification.

Teachers agreeing to seek an additional certification would visit the local university, have a degree plan drawn up, and take courses for one to three years to complete the degree. On several occasions, a teacher on an emergency certificate would stay long enough to get a particular certification and then leave for better pay and a better location.

Teacher/coaches were hired and most stayed from three to four years before leaving for better and higher paying jobs in bigger districts. Whether teachers were full time teachers or teacher/coaches, the secondary school schedule and curriculum offerings had to be reworked numerous times before finalized. Sometimes, the schedule was still being constructed as late as August first, approximately one week before school started.

In addition to teacher turnover and shortages in critical areas, the personnel who remained in the district were over worked. A counselor trying to serve both elementary and secondary students does little counseling. His or her job is mainly testing, as numerous tests are given yearly to establish academic accountability.

Several teachers drove school buses morning and afternoon; all were ask to take a turn selling tickets at the weekly football or basketball

games. All teachers were involved in the sponsorship of a school club or organization.

Curriculum

Teachers with numerous responsibilities and demands must find the time to make sure the students have well prepared lessons and meaningful assignments. Some teachers are able to accomplish all duties assigned with excellence, but some just cannot keep up with demands, particularly if they have families. Students may or may not receive quality instruction, depending on the demands placed on teachers and the willingness of teachers to take work home after a long work day.

Community

The community the school served placed great value on the rural school. The district was the second largest employer in the immediate area and some parents worked at the school as teachers, instructional aides, or cooks. The school was the center of activity for the whole community.

Parent support in the small school was plentiful in both elementary and secondary school. Athletic events were well attended and provided most of the entertainment for community residents.

Financial Support

The community school valued having a school in town. However, few residents felt that taxes should be raised to upgrade and expand the facilities. The average state tax rate was $1.41 in 1998 and the school tax rate was $1.175 during the same period. Residents resisted raising taxes even though the children would benefit from better facilities.

School Board

Members of the school board were hired to oversee the management of the school. The individuals serving on the board in 1998 were determined to keep property taxes and school expenses at a minimum. Only one-fourth of the maintenance and operation expense for the school was paid for through local property taxes, while three-fourths of the maintenance and operation costs were provided by the state. This funding arrangement was agreeable to the residents of the community. School board members were proud that the state was paying the largest financial share to maintain the school. A $1.30 tax rate would have qualified the district to compete for a facilities grant offered by the state. Still, the board and the community served opted to leave the tax rate lower than the $1.30 rate.

Students

The students knew little about tax rates. The majority of students had known no other school and were contend with what was available. Students who did not thrive in the two larger area schools sought enrollment in the small school with expectations that the work would be easier and expectations for performance would be lower. Unfortunately, the students were correct.

Conclusions

On the one hand, the school is the center of social and cultural life of a rural community; on the other hand, the purpose of the school is to provide the children of the community with the best learning environment and instructional program available. Schools do not exist merely to provide community members with a social life. When inadequate facilities, teachers, and instructional programs exist, alternative schooling arrangements should be sought.

School consolidation is one option. However, communities resist consolidation for various reasons. If consolidation is not a logical option the consolidating school services might be explored.

Options for consideration might include the following:

1. Consolidation of superintendent services. One superintendent could manage a number of small rural schools. Principals and teachers could fully implement site-based management in the operation of the school. Funds saved on superintendent salaries might be used to improve facilities, add student services, and offer pay incentives for teachers certified in critical areas.
2. Purchase of supplies and materials could be more cost effective if purchased in bulk. Savings might be realized in the areas of food commodities, paper supplies, instructional equipment, and employee health insurance.
3. Small districts might collaborate with large districts to provide training for school to work. A collaborative vocational center could provide training for numerous jobs included under the subject areas of computer technology, building trades, horticulture and robotics to name a few.
4. A school board made up of individuals from all districts would bring an awareness of student instructional needs for the whole county. Plans could be shared for increasing services to the

handicapped, providing quality vocational training, and optimum instruction in core curriculum areas.

Keeping the education of the students in mind eliminates the narrow focus of one school for one community and focuses the emphasis on providing better instructional programs for the students. Parents, teachers, administrators, and communities must meet the challenge without regard for personal gain or loss.

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Biographical Information

Carolyn McCreight was born and reared in Temple, Texas, a metropolitan area located near Waco, Texas. She earned degrees from the University of Mary Hardin-Baylor in Belton, Texas, East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas, and Baylor University in Waco, Texas. In addition to a bachelor of science degree, a master's of education degree, and a doctorate in educational administration, she earned certifications in instruction and administration from Howard Payne University in Brownwood, Texas, Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas, and East Texas State University in Commerce, Texas.

Dr. McCreight as served in the public schools of Texas as a teacher, secondary program advisor, assistant principal, principal, and superintendent. She is presently employed at Texas A & M International University in Laredo, Texas where she teaches courses in school administration through the Department of Education Professional Programs.